

SECTARIANISM RENOUNCED.

TO THE READER.

‘If God reveal any thing to you by any other instrument, be ready to receive it; for I am verily persuaded, I am very confident, the Lord has more truth yet to break forth out of his Holy Word.’
—*Parting Counsel of the Rev. Mr. Robinson to those who commenced the Settlement at Plymouth.*

THE following Letter was presented to the Congregational Church in Middlebury, Vt., about the time of its date, and by that body referred to a committee; but whether any action has been taken upon it since that period, the writer is unable to say. He has been induced to publish it in this form, mainly from three considerations:

1. Christian candor and frankness seemed to require, that a numerous circle of friends, to whom the writer is indebted for many proofs of strong affection and confidence, should be informed of a step so intimately connected with his present and future welfare; and he prefers that they should form their opinions of his course from the Letter itself, rather than from vague and exaggerated reports.

2. The same reasons which induced him to *withdraw* from a human Church, seemed to demand a *public testimony* against all similar associations, as inimical to the principles of Christianity, and hostile to the various schemes of Reform, which are the glory of the age, and which are doing so much for the elevation of fallen and imbruted humanity.

3. The *subject* of the Letter, in whatever light it may be viewed, is one of very great importance, and deserves the serious attention of all who would labor effectually for the renovation of a world lying in wickedness. The question whether those who believe that the gospel is hostile to violence and oppression, in all their forms, can consistently remain members of associations, which, although claiming to be *Churches of Christ*, either lend their support to War and Slavery, or refuse to bear testimony against these atrocious crimes, is pressing hard upon the consciences of hundreds in this community, and can be settled only in the light of Revelation and of those immutable principles which are at once the essence and the foundation of all Truth. The following Letter, if it does not throw any new light upon the subject, may serve to quicken investigation, and call forth discussion, and thus be made the occasion of good. The writer is confident, that the principles on which he has acted will stand the test of a rigid examination, and that such an examination, moreover, is all that is wanting to satisfy enlightened and conscientious minds of their truth.

Influenced by these considerations, he commends the Letter to all who are willing to follow Truth at whatever sacrifice, and who long for the triumph of Christianity over all forms of selfishness, violence and oppression.

Boston, Aug. 15, 1839.

RENUNCIATION.

To the Congregational Church in Middlebury, Vt.

DEAR BRETHREN AND SISTERS :—

It is, if I mistake not, about three years since I esteemed it both a duty and a privilege to become a member of your body. I then believed that you were in reality what you claimed, and still claim to be—a Church of the Lord Jesus Christ ; and, consequently, that I could not rightfully withdraw from you, except for the purpose of connecting myself with another similar association. It is my duty now to apprise you, that my views of the nature of your organization, and, indeed, of all the ecclesiastical organizations with which I am acquainted, have undergone a radical change. I now regard them as *mere human societies*, which can rightfully exercise no powers whatever, except such as may have been rightfully conferred upon them by the individuals of which they are composed. That

they have derived, in their associated capacity, any power from the great Head of the Church, I do not believe; and hence, it is clear to my mind, that I may as rightfully withdraw from your body as from any other human society; and that, so far as the adoption of your Confession of Faith and Covenant is to be understood as a denial of my right in this respect, I committed an error in embracing them. I readily concede that moral beings have a right to form associations, (on principles which do not restrict individual freedom,) for the purpose of mutual edification, and the propagation of what they believe to be gospel truth; but to call such associations *Churches of Christ*, I believe to be an assumption wholly unwarranted by the Scriptures. Christ has but *one* Church in the world, and the members of that Church are known, not by their connection with any society formed by men, but 'by their fruits;' consequently, a withdrawal from such a society is not a withdrawal from the Church of Christ. It is my full conviction, that Christianity has suffered, and is still suffering greatly from the common belief, that organizations, which are the work of men, are Churches of Christ; and I cannot consent, by remaining a member of your body, to give countenance to so pernicious an error.

But, aside from this view of the *nature* of the Church organizations of the present day, there are other important reasons why I feel called upon, by a

withdrawal from your body, to bear a solemn testimony against them. The circumstances under which I make this communication will not allow me to state these reasons at length. On a future occasion, and in another form, I may lay before you a full statement of my views. At present I can only say, that it is my full and deliberate conviction, after much reflection upon the subject, that the system of ecclesiastical organizations, which prevails at the present day, and of which your body forms a part, is a mighty hindrance to the progress of Christianity—a block before and a weight behind the wheel of gospel reform—a shield for the defence of those giant iniquities which are threatening to bring upon the nominally Christian world the sore judgments of Heaven, rather than the instrumentality by which those iniquities are to be exterminated. Not only are they mere human organizations, but they appear to me to be generally governed by the sinful maxims and time-serving policy of the world; and instead of inculcating the pure principles of that gospel which is the power of God unto salvation, in many cases to teach for doctrines the commandments of men. In the language of another—‘Christianity, as taught by the Savior, is a lovely code of moral truths—it was the *democracy* and radicalism of his day—it was tolerant and charitable—meek and humble—assuaging misery—rebuking pride and insolence—succor-

ing the needy—shielding the oppressed! How changed! It rests now, in many instances, as we find it *practically*, on the frail props of error, intolerance, pride, cruelty and mendacity. It raises costly churches—it decorates them with vain and expensive trappings. Its consecrated vessels must be of embossed silver, often inlaid with gold. The truths of Holy Writ must be made more lovely by the gilded dross of earth upon the binding. It vaunteth itself. This is practical, modern Christianity—not that pure and holy religion taught by the Son of Purity himself, some eighteen hundred years ago.' Like the Scribes and Pharisees of old, it exacts 'tithes of mint, annis and cummin,' while 'the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith,' are sacrificed to human pride, ambition and selfishness. Its ministry, with some noble exceptions, is proud, haughty, aspiring, self-seeking; and instead of flashing day-light upon the moral darkness of the world, and faithfully rebuking iniquity in high places, it often attempts, in utter disregard of the authority of God, to

' Hang another flower
Of earthly sort about the sacred truth,
And mix the bitter text
With relish suited to the sinner's taste.'

When the corruptions of these organizations first arrested my attention, I consoled myself with the

hope that they might be purified and reformed; but subsequent reflection, and the events of the few past years, have utterly destroyed that hope, and forced upon my mind the conviction, that their *overthrow*, and not their reformation, is 'registered on the scroll of Destiny.' They appear to me, with their formidable array of creeds, forms, ceremonies and observances, to be the rubbish which hides the pure principles of the gospel—the wood, hay and stubble, which must be consumed in the fire of Christian truth—the dross which must be purged away, before pure Christianity can triumph in the hearts of men.

In withdrawing, as I now do, from your body, I am fully sensible that I take a step, which, in whatever light it may be viewed, is one of great importance to myself; but I believe I have counted the cost, and that, in full reliance upon God for assistance, I am prepared for the consequences that may ensue. I know that many, for whom I cherish the warmest affection, and who are endeared to me by the strongest earthly ties, will be sorely grieved at my course, and that they will weep over what they esteem my unfortunate errors; while others, who cannot appreciate my motives, will look upon my withdrawal as a virtual renunciation of Christianity. But I must suffer neither my attachment to friends on the one hand, nor a fear of the reproach of men on the other, to turn me aside from the path of duty.

What if I am denounced as an infidel, or reviled and calumniated as a fanatic and a disorganizer? 'It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord: if they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household?' I must not, I dare not, shrink from taking up, at whatever sacrifice, the cross of Christ; and feeling constrained by an influence which I cannot innocently disregard, to 'come out and be separate' from all the sectarian organizations of the present day, and register my testimony against them, I do now, with the warmest affection for you all, and an earnest desire that you may be illuminated by Divine Wisdom, and led into the true spirit and freedom of the gospel, withdraw from your body, and subscribe myself,

Your sincere friend and brother,

OLIVER JOHNSON.

February 25, 1839.